

CTC REPORT

Stealing Al-Qa'ida's Playbook

JARRET M. BRACHMAN

WILLIAM F. MCCANTS

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Combating Terrorism Center at West Point
607 Cullum Road
United States Military Academy
West Point, NY 10996
<http://www.ctc.usma.edu>
To obtain additional information, contact the CTC at
845.938.8495 or email: ctc@usma.edu

Foreword

General Wayne A. Downing (Retired)

Policies and strategic communications cannot be separated.

—Report of the Defense Science Board on Strategic Communications, September, 2004

As the Defense Science Board observed two years ago, an essential element of U.S. combating terrorism efforts must involve strategic communications composed of coordinated public diplomacy, public affairs, open military information operations (which include psychological operations), and classified operations.

The United States government reached a significant stage in the fight against jihadi-inspired terrorism this past year when it decided to place a greater emphasis on fighting its ideological roots. Yet despite this appropriate course adjustment, the U.S. government and its Western allies generally do not know the main producers of this ideology and the significant issues that unite and divide the movement—information that is key to defeating it.

Our authors suggest ways to address this significant shortfall. Not only do they attempt to answer the *who* and *what* sort of questions in plain language; they also outline a highly original method for discerning the answers to these questions that has, up to now, been ignored or poorly used.

One of the best places to look for information regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the jihadi movement, Brachman and McCants argue, is in texts written by jihadi ideologues.* Of course, a number of analysts inside and outside the U.S. government read texts like these for insight into al-Qa`ida's strategic thinking. But it has been my experience that many of the most useful texts have not received attention. And of those that do, there

* The Combating Terrorism Center at West Point is currently conducting this type of investigation using recently declassified al-Qa`ida documents, which are being made publicly available for the first time at www.ctc.usma.edu.

are often useful pieces of information that get overlooked. There are two reasons for this:

- First, there is an overabundance of texts. Since there is no metric yet for determining which works are important within the jihadi movement, text selection tends to be a very subjective process and minor thinkers sometimes receive more attention than they deserve. Moreover, the overabundance of texts and the paucity of analysts mean that the latter must often scan texts rapidly for important information, which is sometimes predetermined by their initial assumptions. Time and resources are not available for looking for information that challenges these assumptions.
- Second, useful pieces of information are overlooked because many analysts who are new to this literature do not know what to look for. As Brachman and McCants observe, jihadi leaders are remarkably open and blunt when discussing who their biggest competition is and what their PR vulnerabilities are. This is precisely the sort of information needed for crafting effective counterterrorism strategies. The authors of this article have given several concrete examples of what type of information to look for, making it easy for others to use their method.

If the jihadis are right in their assessment of geopolitics and the situation in the Middle East, overt U.S. military action or diplomacy can often be more harmful than helpful in the fight against jihadi-inspired terrorism. Indeed, the jihadi ideologues surveyed in the article focus most of their attention on psychological operations to exploit our actions rather than on large-scale, direct military action.

Understanding the vulnerabilities of the jihadi movement is the necessary prelude to defeating it. In this article, Brachman and McCants give us the tools and some recommendations to do just that.

Stealing Al-Qa`ida's Playbook

Jarret M. Brachman

William F. McCants*

The key to defeating the jihadi movement is identifying its strengths and weaknesses so that the former may be countered or co-opted and the latter exploited. In this article we argue that the people who know these strengths and weaknesses best are the jihadis themselves; one just needs to know where (and how) to look for their insights.

Jihadi leaders are surprisingly frank when discussing the vulnerabilities of their movement and their strategies for toppling local regimes and undermining the United States. Their candor is, in large part, a consequence of struggles for leadership within the movement; thus, a leader of one group will publish his strategic vision in order to gain more recruits and achieve a reputation as a serious scholar worthy of respect. It is also a consequence of the United States' success in destroying jihadi training camps and denying safe havens—jihadi leaders have had to put their writings online so as to provide continuing guidance to a very decentralized following.

In a sense, members of the jihadi movement have put their team's playbooks online. By mining these texts for their tactical and strategic insights, the United States will be able to craft effective tactics, techniques, and procedures to defeat followers of the movement. In what follows, we will demonstrate the efficacy of this approach by highlighting the insights we have gleaned from the works of four prominent jihadi ideologues.**

* Jarret Brachman is the Director of Research of the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. William McCants is a Fellow at the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point and director of its Salafi Ideology Project.

** With the exception of Ayman al-Zawahiri's *Knights Under the Banner of the Prophet*, the other books discussed below can be found in Arabic on al-Qa`ida's premier electronic library, www.tawhed.ws. Zawahiri's work is readily available online in English translation.

The Prophet and Paul Kennedy

O people! The viciousness of the Russian soldier is twice that of the American soldier. If the Americans suffer one tenth of the casualties the Russians suffered in Afghanistan and Chechnya, they will flee and never look back. That is because the current structure of the American and Western armies is not the same as their structure during the colonial era. They have reached a stage of effeminacy that makes them unable to sustain battles for a long period of time, a weakness they compensate for with a deceptive media halo.

—Abu Bakr Naji, *The Management of Barbarism*,¹ 2004

Although we would like to claim credit for the approach described in the introductory paragraphs, it is modeled after a similar approach used by Abu Bakr Naji, a rising star in the jihadi movement. In his 2004 work, *The Management of Barbarism*,^{*} Naji urges fellow jihadis to study Western works on management, military principles, political theory, and sociology in order to borrow strategies that have worked for Western governments and to discern their weaknesses.² For example, Naji urges his readers to study works on administration so that they will be able to administer regions that fall into political chaos (see below).³ Military principles should be studied so that the jihadis may better engage in asymmetrical warfare.⁴ Works on sociology should be studied, particularly those about tribes in the Middle East, so that jihadis can better mobilize tribal and ethnic groups for their own ends.⁵ (Naji advocates buying off tribal leaders and justifies his position by adducing examples of the Prophet doing the same.)⁶ Finally, works on political theory should be studied so that the jihadis will be able to identify and exploit the political weaknesses of the United States.⁷ He urges them to identify and capitalize on the self-interest of allies of the United States in order to fracture their alliances.⁸ He also urges them to study books on the consequences of imperial overreach. In this vein, he quotes directly from an Arabic translation of Paul Kennedy's *Rise and Fall*: "If

^{*} William McCants translated this work for the Olin Institute at Harvard under the direction of Michael Doran, who was one of the first people to find the text on the Internet. Doran has written a very insightful introduction to the work that is not yet published (the observation regarding the spread of jihadi strategy documents online as a consequence of the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan is his). Stephen Ulph at www.jamestown.org has also written a useful *précis* of the work.

America broadens its use of military power and strategically expands more than necessary, this will lead to its downfall.”⁹

Based on his reading of these works and the experience of the jihadis in Afghanistan, Naji articulates a grand strategy for defeating the United States. First, he observes that after the rise of the two superpowers following World War II, nations allied themselves with the United States or the Soviet Union in return for financial and military support.¹⁰ The jihadi movement had been unsuccessful in the past because the superpowers propped up these proxy governments and convinced the masses through the media that they were invincible.¹¹ The solution, Naji says, is to provoke a superpower into invading the Middle East directly. This will result in a great propaganda victory for the jihadis because the people will 1) be impressed that the jihadis are directly fighting a superpower, 2) be outraged over the invasion of a foreign power, 3) be disabused of the notion that the superpower is invincible the longer the war goes on, and, 4) be angry at the proxy governments allied with the invading superpower.¹² Moreover, he argues, it will bleed the superpower’s economy and military.¹³ This will lead to social unrest at home and the ultimate defeat of the superpower.¹⁴

Naji does not suffer under the illusion that the jihadis can defeat the United States in a direct military confrontation; rather, the clash with the United States is more important for propaganda victories in the short term, and the political defeat of the United States in the long-term, as its society fractures and its economy is further strained. Naji observes that this strategy was used with great effect against the Soviet Union and that it will work against United States.¹⁵ Indeed, it may work better against the United States because it does not have the ruthlessness or resolve of the Soviet Union.¹⁶

Interestingly, Naji does not explicitly say that the U.S. invasion of Iraq has played into this strategy, but he does counsel his jihadi brothers in Iraq to be patient, telling them that victory can come at any time.¹⁷ Once the U.S. withdraws from Iraq, he forecasts, its media halo will dissipate and the regimes that supported it will be vulnerable. The jihadis should quickly take advantage of the situation by invading countries that border Iraq, where they will be welcomed as liberators.¹⁸

Just as Naji has a plan for exploiting the vulnerabilities of U.S. hegemony, he also has a strategy for establishing a caliphate. This strategy, inspired by his reading of Western literature, his experience in the Middle East, and his

interpretation of Muhammad's early career,¹⁹ consists of three stages. First, jihadis should bomb sensitive local targets, such as tourist sites and oil facilities.²⁰ These "vexation and exhaustion" operations will force the local regime to enhance security around these crucial industries.²¹ This drawing in of security forces will then open up security vacuums in remote regions or cities. The resulting chaos in those areas will cause the population to welcome a jihadi cadre of administrators who will manage the basic necessities of life. Once they have gained control of these regions, these "administrations of barbarism" can network with each other and move towards a caliphate (Naji is not clear about the transition from the second to third stage).²²

In addition to outlining his strategic vision, Naji also discloses weaknesses in the jihadi movement. As a member of a secret terrorist organization, Naji discusses the problems that predictably confront such an entity, like difficulties in resolving chains of command, ferreting out spies within the organization, and reining in overzealous recruits.²³ Naji also worries that low-ranking members of the movement will initiate their own large-scale attacks against high-value targets. Medium and small attacks are fine, he argues, and one does not need approval from the High Command for them.²⁴ (Thus, Naji suggests that if jihadis are arrested in one country, a cell in another country should respond by bombing a medium-sized target, which will enhance the perception that there is a worldwide jihadi movement).²⁵ But launching another 9/11-type attack or targeting certain classes of people is a decision best left to the High Command—targeting the wrong people at the wrong time would turn the masses against the movement.²⁶

This solicitude for the sentiments of the masses indicates that public opinion is of great concern for Naji—if the movement loses the support of the masses, its pool of recruits will dry up and operations will be harder to undertake. The Muslim public is particularly troubled, he observes, by the jihadis' excessive use of violence, particularly against other Muslims.²⁷ They are also concerned that the jihadis do more harm than good, creating public disorder (traditional Islam values social stability over all else) and provoking government crackdowns on innocents.²⁸

Part of the problem, Naji points out, is that jihadi groups in the past failed miserably to explain their attacks to the public, which allowed the local regime to turn public opinion against them. One example he notes was the

failure of the Islamic Group in Egypt to properly spin its attack on the tourist industry, which made it easy for the government to portray it as an attack on the nation's economy. This had a devastating impact on the jihadi movement in Egypt in the 90s.²⁹ The movement was also crippled by arbitrary arrests of suspected jihadis, he recalls, which led many families to pressure their youth not to join.³⁰

Naji is also concerned that the momentum of the movement can be slowed by other clerics who challenge its legitimacy and siphon off its recruits among the youth. Thus, he sharply criticizes fellow Salafis* who refuse to engage in a jihad not sanctioned by a ruler and who focus their energy instead on proselytizing.³¹ It is violence, Naji avers, that will force the Muslim masses to choose sides, not peaceful proselytizing among them.³² Once an Islamic caliphate is established, then the people can be made to understand true Islam.³³

In addition to criticizing fellow Salafis, Naji also worries about non-Salafi clerics who are popular among the youth and who siphon off support for the jihadis. For example, he mentions al-Habashi in Lebanon, a leader of a popular Sufi** order who is willing to participate in parliamentary elections. Naji maintains that it would have been better to have killed him early in his career than to have let him become the powerful figure he is today (he quotes Abu Qatada in this regard – see below).³⁴ Of even greater concern is the Muslim Brotherhood³⁵ – its success in recruiting youth, its willingness to

* Salafis are Sunni Muslims who believe that the true understanding of Islam is based solely on the words and deeds of Muhammad and his Companions; therefore, they are extremely conservative given that their understanding of Islam is rooted in the seventh century. But they are not traditional religious thinkers since they refuse to accept the rulings of most medieval Muslim authorities, unless they are also based on the practice of the pious forefathers (*salaf*).

** Sufis are Muslim mystics (predominantly Sunni) who seek to draw closer to God. Sufi ideas began to percolate in early Islam, but followers of Sufi leaders did not begin to organize themselves into brotherhoods until a later period. Their fraternal bonds and their obedience to a local spiritual guide make Sufi orders a very powerful and cohesive element of Islamic society.

Aside from the shared focus on drawing closer to God, Sufis are incredibly diverse. Some Sufi orders are entirely otherworldly, eschewing politics altogether, while others are more activist (e.g. members of some Sufi orders in Afghanistan fought against the Soviets). Some are extremely conservative, while others are more liberal in their religious practice.

work with local regimes, and its efficacy in providing social services make it the leading competitor for jihadis.

Finally, Naji addresses an issue that is peculiar to a religiously-inspired movement: sectarianism. He observes that the jihadi movement has often split apart over theological differences. As with his rejection of peaceful proselytizing, Naji suggests tabling these differences until the caliphate is established. In support of his viewpoint, he notes that Ibn Taymiyya and other medieval Muslim scholars respected by Salafis were willing to work with rulers they did not agree with theologically as long as they were willing to undertake jihad in defense of the community.³⁶

The Shayma Effect

The government used the death of Shayma, may God bless her soul, and portrayed the incident as an attack by the Al-Jihad Group against Shayma, not against Prime Minister Sidqi.

—Ayman al-Zawahiri, *Knights Under the Banner of the Prophet*, 2001

Readers may rightly detect a number of similarities between Naji's work and the recent letter by Ayman al-Zawahiri to Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi: the headaches caused by overenthusiastic recruits; worry about sectarianism; the reverse "oil-spot" strategy; the concern with maintaining popular support; the desire for direct U.S. engagement as a means for motivating the masses; and a disapproval of Muslim-on-Muslim violence. The similarities are not because Zawahiri is reading Naji; rather, Naji's work encapsulates the thinking of the High Command since the late 90s.

Both works are also informed by the propaganda failures of jihadis in Egypt during the 90s. Yet, whereas Naji can coolly play armchair mujahid (to borrow a phrase from Stephen Ulph), those lessons were hard-learned for Zawahiri during his stewardship of Islamic Jihad.

One of his most painful lessons, Zawahiri relates in his *Knights Under the Banner of the Prophet*, was learned after an assassination attempt on Egyptian Prime Minister Atif Sidqi. Members of Islamic Jihad detonated a car bomb in a failed attempt to kill the prime minister as his motorcade passed by. Instead, the blast killed a 12 year-old girl named Shayma in a nearby elementary school. The government launched a media campaign claiming that Islamic Jihad had deliberately targeted Shayma and not the prime minister. Zawahiri explains that members of the group had surveyed the area and thought the school was unoccupied. Nevertheless, he admits that he was deeply pained by the death of the girl and acknowledges that the government's media campaign drastically reduced public support for the movement. It also stunned his senior leadership, causing several of them to resign from the organization.

This background explains Zawahiri's words of caution to Zarqawi in his recent letter, counseling him against attacks that could inadvertently kill

Muslim civilians. This is not out of ideological or theological reasons, but from a purely pragmatic, strategic calculus: The masses must view jihadis as liberators, not oppressors. They must be seen as fighting a just war and walking the moral high ground. Killing Muslims—even when undertaking legitimate operations against members of an unpopular local regime or symbols of Western occupation—is damaging to the jihadi movement because it inevitably leads to a loss of support among the Muslim masses, a consequence we call the “Shayma Effect.”

Creating More Competition in the Salafi Marketplace

This man is content to claim that he is a Salafi so that he can be an imam for some inexperienced boys whom he feeds slogans and shimmering phrases.

—Abu Qatada, *Between Two Methods*,³⁷ 1994

Just as jihadi ideologues are frank about the propaganda tactics they are most vulnerable to, they are equally blunt about which Muslim religious leaders they most fear. Contemporary jihadi tracts can be mined for this sort of information, but older works are equally instructive—a specific enemy may no longer be a threat, but by understanding why he was a threat in the past we can look for, and perhaps exploit, similarly threatening enemies in the present.

Take, for example, the writings of Abu Qatada, one of al-Qa`ida's chief religious ideologues.* They are a veritable who's-who of jihadi enemies. We have already seen one example of this in Naji's book, where he quoted Abu Qatada's fulminations over the power of al-Habashi.

But Abu Qatada does not limit his anger to non-Salafis; indeed, some of his sharpest criticism is aimed at fellow-travelers. For instance, his *Between Two Methods*, an influential series of articles written in 1994 (Naji quotes from it repeatedly to justify his positions), contains numerous references to various Salafi competitors at that time. In these articles, one Salafi above all others is the object of Abu Qatada's ire: Rabi` al-Madkhali. Abu Qatada rages at this "so-called Salafi" for challenging jihadi notions of leadership.³⁸ He also expresses dismay that he has succeeded in duping the youth into following him and for using them as spies for the Saudi government, informing on any jihadis who enter Saudi Arabia illegally.³⁹

* Abu Qatada is a Jordanian of Palestinian origin. He studied Islamic law in Saudi Arabia, where he obtained a Master's degree in jurisprudence. In 1993 he went to the U.K. seeking political asylum. There he edited *al-Ansar*, the official organ of the GIA (the Armed Islamic Group, a particularly violent jihadi organization in Algeria that was responsible for massacring thousands of civilians during the 90s), and served as al-Qa`ida's chief spokesman and coordinator in Europe. Although the U.K. government has curtailed his activities, his writings continue to have an immense influence on the jihadi movement.

One could be forgiven for failing to understand why Abu Qatada was so angry: Madkhali is not well-known in the West and he is no longer a person of much influence in Saudi Arabia. But in the 90s, he was incredibly influential in Saudi Arabia (and he still has a large following among Muslims in Europe).^{*} Much of this influence derived from the support he received from the Saudi government. During and after the first Gulf War, the Saudi government faced intense criticism from the leaders of the Sahwa movement (a politically active strain of Wahhabism) for allowing U.S. troops to be stationed in Saudi Arabia. These leaders had a large following, particularly among the youth. To blunt their appeal, the Saudi government arrested the movement's leaders and strongly backed Madkhali, who supported the regime, was politically quietist, and, most importantly, was effective at siphoning off potential Sahwa recruits, particularly among the youth.⁴⁰

Aside from Saudi support, two things account for much of Madkhali's popularity among the youth: he used cassette tapes to spread his message⁴¹ and he was quite skillful at discrediting his opponents. As an example of the latter, one of his favorite tactics was to call jihadis "Qutbis" rather than Salafis, since they agreed with the political doctrines of Sayyid Qutb, a leading jihadi thinker who was executed by the Egyptian government in the 60s. Doing this denied them the legitimacy of being known as Salafis, followers of the pious forefathers, and suggested that they were members of a deviant sect. To this end, another of Madkhali's effective tactics was to force an opponent to acknowledge that Sayyid Qutb, whose teachings he followed, had made a number of theological statements that were at variance with orthodoxy; thus, his followers were heretics too.

^{*} For example, in 2002, four hundred followers gathered in a French mosque to hear a badly-relayed phone call from Madkhali to the congregation (www.fsa.ulaval.ca/personnel/vernag/EH/F/cause/lectures/essor_des_salafistes.htm). See also Gilles Kepel, *The War for Muslim Minds*, 251-3.

The Lessons of Jihads Past

History is filled with lessons...and wars and revolutions are no exception.... The period which followed the tragedy gave us time to contemplate and examine Islamic and global experiences that are rich and worthy of study....[These] rich experiences that pervade Muslim and non-Muslim communities have been investigated and recorded, making them easy to obtain for those who want to study and learn. However, no one studied them and we had to walk this path to reveal it for ourselves so that the pitfalls could be laid bare. I hope we heed the lesson.

—Abu Mus`ab al-Suri, *Observations Concerning the Jihadi Experience in Syria*,⁴² date unknown

As the author of a massive handbook on global insurgency—or, as he calls it, “the remedy for the U.S. disease”⁴³—Mustafa Setmariam Nasar has written his way into the intellectual heart of today’s jihadi-Salafi movement. Also known as `Umar `Abd al-Hakim, “the pen jihadist,” “Castro,” and most widely by his *nom de guerre*, “Abu Mus`ab al-Suri,” this senior al-Qa`ida ideologue had been off the counterterrorism radar until recently. Indeed, in one massive chart of links between jihadi leaders and operatives that the authors saw this past year, Suri was depicted as a person of little consequence, possessing a single link with another al-Qa`ida operative. While such link analysis is important when determining personal contacts, it fails to accurately depict the intellectual impact of ideologues like Suri.*

Like Naji, Suri is an astute observer of Western strategic thinking. In particular, he closely monitors Western counterterrorism strategy, believing the following to be its salient features:

- Drying up financial springs for terrorism
- Killing and imprisoning the jihadi leadership and lower-level cadres
- Creating multinational agreements for the extradition of terrorists
- Abolishing safe havens and shelters for terrorist organizations
- Moving from regional to international security cooperation

* For example, Reuvan Paz has noted that Abu Muhammad al-Hilali’s recent analysis of jihadi terrorist attacks in Egypt is heavily indebted to Suri for its overall theoretical framework (Reuven Paz, “Al-Qaeda’s Search for New Fronts: Instructions for Jihadi Activity in Egypt and Sinai,” PRISM Occasional Papers, Vol. 3, No. 7 (October 2005), available on-line at www.e-prism.org).

- Expanding counterterrorism legislation
- Launching an aggressive media war aimed at the defamation of the jihadis⁴⁴

Suri is also a careful student of jihads in the modern era that failed. These failures, Suri contends, happened for several reasons. First, local regimes worked together against the jihadis. Syria, for instance, worked with the security services of Jordan, Iraq, and other Middle Eastern countries to cripple the movement from the mid-60s through the 80s.⁴⁵ Had other jihadi campaigns been launched in those neighboring countries, Suri points out, significant pressure on the Syrian jihadis would have been alleviated as foreign security services would have been distracted by events at home.⁴⁶ Therefore, jihadis around the world must begin launching attacks and establishing bases of operation (no matter how small) in every country. As Suri remarks, "Neither the United States nor ten armies of its like will be able to fight in hundreds of Fallujahs throughout the Arab and Islamic world."⁴⁷

Second, jihadis failed in the past by ignoring ethnic minorities and tribes. Thus, Syria bought off Kurds and Bedouin tribes, using them against the jihadis. Suri counsels that jihadis should pay more attention to these sorts of ethnic minorities and tribes so that they cannot be co-opted in the future.⁴⁸ Indeed, America's use of local Pakistani and Afghani forces to serve as military proxies in its invasion of Afghanistan was a particularly painful reminder of this lesson for Suri, who bitterly recalls the "betrayal" of some of the Pakistani border tribes who turned over a number of jihadis who had fled from Tora Bora to the Americans.⁴⁹ This devastating blow to al-Qa`ida could have been prevented had it reached out earlier to these groups.

Third, past jihads failed because low-ranking fighters did not feel a personal connection to their leaders. As a consequence, Suri relates that many jihadis laid down their rifles and began pursuing their own interests over those of the movement, some marrying locals and starting families, others simply returning home.⁵⁰

Contrary to the common Western assumption that this tier is little more than cannon-fodder, Suri concentrates, *à la* Mao Tse Tung, on the importance of these foot soldiers, arguing that they will eventually ascend the ranks to senior level positions, replacing those who have been captured

and killed. Therefore, these fighters have to be taught the correct strategic vision early on so that they will be ready to assume senior command positions later.⁵¹

Fourth, past jihads failed because those fighting them did not win popular support. The Muslim masses did not understand who the jihadis were, what they wanted to accomplish, and why they used violence to achieve their goals because jihadis did not sell themselves and their movement effectively. The Muslim masses, Suri argues, must be viewed as an integral part of the broader strategy and given a stake in the jihad.⁵²

Propagandists, Suri states, will play the pivotal role in generating the "global Islamic resistance" (see below). They can do this by pursuing aggressive media campaigns and using technology like satellite television and the Internet to communicate the movement's objectives and justify its use of violence to the public, particularly to the young Muslim men around the world in search of ways to participate.⁵³ But Suri warns would-be propagandists against using lies and exaggeration. The target Muslim populations, he argues, will see through such falsehoods and grow disaffected with the Salafi message.⁵⁴

Finally, Suri argues that one of the most effective ways to foster the emergence of new local jihadi movements is to keep Muslim clerics actively involved. Previous jihadi campaigns suffered from a lack of strategic thinking and religious legitimacy because they alienated the religious elders. Only by making them the core of their fight will the movement have the legitimacy and ideological firepower necessary to facilitate the development of a new generation of jihadi intellectuals and foot soldiers.⁵⁵

Although religious leaders have an important role to play in the education of the rising generation of jihadis, the most important component of their education will be engagement in jihad itself. Indeed, it seems the primary purpose of local jihads is not the overthrow of the West, but the training and indoctrination of this rising generation⁵⁶ (Naji and earlier ideologues like 'Abd Allah 'Azzam also emphasize the didactic value of jihad). From this, a self-sustaining, ever-widening movement Suri calls the "global Islamic resistance" will be born that will sweep away the old order and establish the global caliphate in its place.⁵⁷

Conclusion

We argued in the beginning of this article that texts like those surveyed above can be mined for strategic and tactical insights that will enable the United States to significantly diminish the power of the jihadi movement. What follows are several general observations based on the above texts, each followed by some recommended possible actions that the U.S. can undertake to counter or exploit the jihadis' messages and actions.*

1. Thus far, direct engagement with the United States has been good for the jihadi movement. As Naji argues, it rallies the locals behind the movement, drains the United States of resources, and puts pressure on the regimes that are allied with the U.S. Conversely, it is bad for the jihadi movement when the United States operates clandestinely or through proxies, whether they be local regimes, tribes, or ethnic minorities—jihadis have nothing to rally the public against and will be seen as fighting their own people.

The United States should avoid direct, large-scale military action in the Middle East. If such fighting is necessary, it must be done through proxies whenever possible. Buying off tribal leaders, as Naji advocates, may be effective in some regions.

2. The jihadi movement has become decentralized and training camps like those in Afghanistan four years ago are no longer absolutely necessary for the military or doctrinal preparation of new recruits. Certainly, safe havens are still useful, but the jihadis have created serviceable alternatives by offering training in urban areas and virtually on the Internet. The jihadi movement has now metastasized, as Suri hoped, into a self-sustaining movement in which battles and bombings are more important as a means for recruiting and radicalizing a new generation of followers than as a means to a political end.

This suggests that the United States must be aware of the consequences of creating new theaters for jihad, particularly in the Arab world. The U.S. must also find ways to redirect the alienation among Muslim youth that is fueling recruitment (points 4 and 5 following will discuss ways to do this).

* Note that these recommendations are aimed solely at destroying the jihadi movement and must be balanced with other U.S. strategic goals.

3. Although jihadi ideologues recognize the utility of the long term, eternal struggle, they are absolutely serious about establishing Islamic states in the near term. Leading ideologues like Zawahiri and Naji are not thinking within the confines of the nation-state. They are less interested in overthrowing a ruler and replacing his apostate regime with an Islamic regime than they are in establishing small enclaves across the globe in regions that are not well-policed. These regions may spread across several states or they may be as small as a city (e.g. Fallujah) or a province (e.g. al-Anbar). These enclaves can be used as bases for training and launching attacks; but they are more important as nuclei of the future jihadi order, visible examples of the caliphate(s) to come.

The United States must consider the use of local surrogates to thwart the establishment of these enclaves, denying jihadis the tactical and propaganda victories that would accrue. It can also use surrogates to establish “zones of order” in regions where there are security vacuums (i.e. an oil-spot strategy,⁵⁸ the reverse of Naji’s “zones of barbarism”). This would prevent the jihadis from moving in and also create local leaders who could effectively compete with the jihadis.

4. Positive public opinion is necessary for attracting people to join or support the movement; thus, effective propaganda is crucial for the success of the jihadi movement. Conversely, the movement declines in popularity when it is perceived to be attacking fellow Muslims, causing public disorder, damaging critical national industries, or engaging in sectarianism.

The United States government must fund media campaigns that focus on turning Muslim public opinion against the jihadis, but in a very low key and indirect manner. In particular, the U.S. must harness the power of the “Shayma Effect”, broadcasting images of jihadi attacks that have killed Muslim children.

In light of the foregoing points highlighting the deleterious effects of direct U.S. action in the region, it is essential that the U.S. operate behind the scenes. Thus, media campaigns like those mentioned above must be carefully managed by professionals using some of the same, excellent

information strategies and organizations that the U.S. employed so effectively in the Cold War.*

Furthermore, the U.S. must recast its ineffectual public diplomacy efforts. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for the U.S. to elicit pro-American feelings in the Middle East by making public pronouncements about the true nature of Islam or the virtues of democracy. An extremely sophisticated public diplomacy campaign using surrogates and friends is required to avoid the current perception of such pronouncements as hollow and hypocritical, which generates even further bad feeling. Some U.S. efforts have even become fodder for the jihadi propaganda machine and have destroyed the credibility of some Muslim leaders who have tried to help.**

5. Religious leaders play a critical role in attracting youth to the movement, providing religious justification for violence, and determining its overall strategic direction. But this cuts both ways, as non-jihadi religious leaders are able to siphon off support from the movement and challenge its legitimacy.

The United States should very carefully and unobtrusively support Muslim religious leaders and movements that can effectively compete with the jihadi movement in terms of mass appeal and popularity among the youth. Naturally, many of the most effective competitors will not be friendly to the United States and the West; but if the bottom line is a rejection of violence against the United States and its allies, they should be supported.

The difficulty comes in identifying the right leader or group. The U.S. could discretely fund mainstream Salafi figures like Madkhali who are effective in siphoning off support from jihadis and who do not advocate violence (e.g.

* It is questionable whether the Department of Defense can or should manage or be involved in such programs, especially sensitive, classified efforts.

** The following statement from Karen Hughes, the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, was cited recently on a jihadi website as proof that the U.S.'s new diplomatic efforts in the region are sinister and meant to pave the way for further military occupation: "And we plan to forward-deploy regional SWAT teams who can look at the big picture and formulate a more strategic and focused approach to all our public diplomacy assets; not just country by country, but within a region of the world..." (Loy Henderson Auditorium, Washington, DC, September 8, 2005).

by paying for publications, lectures, new schools). This will be effective in the short term, but it further strengthens the dehumanizing Salafi ideology from which the jihadi movement derives much of its inspiration. The U.S. could also fund non-Salafis, but it currently lacks the expertise necessary to determine who is truly influential. Perhaps a better strategy in the near term would be to pressure Middle Eastern governments to allow greater political participation and visibility for groups that jihadis are threatened by. This approach should vary from country to country. For example, in Egypt, it would be the Muslim Brotherhood; in Saudi Arabia, the Shi'a. Again, it is essential that the U.S. hand not be seen.

6. Jihadi ideologues closely follow Western thought and U.S. strategic planning for insights that can be used against the United States and its allies.

The United States government might consider establishing a think tank staffed with highly trained experts on the Middle East and counterinsurgency whose sole purpose would be to identify the major jihadi thinkers and analyze their works in the manner we outlined above. The fruit of this analysis would then be disseminated to other government agencies involved with counterterrorism. As it stands now, there are few agencies that have these sorts of experts. Moreover, when these experts are tasked with analyzing the sorts of texts we have used above (which is very infrequent given other pressures on their time), this analysis often does not escape the orbit of the agency where it originated.

These observations represent a small portion of the strategic and tactical insights that can be gleaned from reading the texts mentioned in this article, to say nothing of the hundreds of texts that are circulating online. Jihadi ideologues have left their playbook lying open. The United States just needs to read it.

Notes

¹ Naji, *Management*, 7.

² Naji, *Management*, 24, 28, 39, 98.

³ Ibid., 23-4.

⁴ Ibid., 28-30.

⁵ Ibid., 39.

⁶ Ibid., 48.

⁷ Ibid., 37-40.

⁸ Ibid., 38.

⁹ Ibid., 7.

¹⁰ Ibid., 5.

¹¹ Ibid., 7.

¹² Ibid., 8.

¹³ Ibid., 8.

¹⁴ Ibid., 7-8.

¹⁵ Ibid., 8, 10, 19.

¹⁶ Ibid., 9.

¹⁷ Ibid., 91.

¹⁸ Ibid., 61.

¹⁹ Ibid., 12 and *passim*.

²⁰ Ibid., 19.

²¹ Ibid., 14.

²² Ibid., 16-21.

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- ²³ Ibid., 25-27, 65-6, 67, 71-2.
- ²⁴ Ibid., 16-17.
- ²⁵ Ibid., 33.
- ²⁶ Ibid., 17, 25.
- ²⁷ Ibid., 31-33.
- ²⁸ Ibid., 106-9.
- ²⁹ Ibid., 19, 41.
- ³⁰ Ibid., 82.
- ³¹ Ibid., 73-80.
- ³² Ibid., 46-7.
- ³³ Ibid., 75.
- ³⁴ Ibid., 69.
- ³⁵ Ibid., 3.
- ³⁶ Ibid., 34.
- ³⁷ Abu Qatada, *Between Two Methods*, Article 8.
- ³⁸ Abu Qatada, *Between Two Methods*, Article 8.
- ³⁹ Ibid., Article 8 and 9.
- ⁴⁰ ICG Saudi Arabia Backgrounder: "Who Are the Islamists?" 31, Sept. 2004: 6.
- ⁴¹ Ibid.
- ⁴² Suri, *Observations*, 6-7.
- ⁴³ "A Statement by Abu Mus`ab al-Suri in Response to the Announcement by the U.S. State Department," *Majallat risalat al-mujahidin*, 2005, no. 3: 10 (available online at www.eprism.org).
- ⁴⁴ Suri, *Global Resistance*, 666.

⁴⁵ Suri, *Observations*, 7-8.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁷ Suri, "Statement," 9.

⁴⁸ Suri, *Observations*, 9-10.

⁴⁹ Suri, *Global Resistance*, 731.

⁵⁰ Suri, *Observations*, 6.

⁵¹ Ibid., 3.

⁵² Ibid., 2.

⁵³ Suri, *Global Resistance*, 1445.

⁵⁴ Suri, *Observations*, 4.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 9.

⁵⁶ Suri, *Global Resistance*, 1335f.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 192-3; 881.

⁵⁸ For the use of the oil-spot strategy in Iraq, see Andrew F. Krepinevich's "How to Win in Iraq," *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2005.

The Combating Terrorism Center at West Point

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The CTC develops strategically integrated and balanced perspectives on national and international security issues. It combines academic, public policy, and military expertise to create a dynamic, intellectual, and practical research approach to terrorism, counterterrorism, weapons of mass destruction, and homeland security issues. Each area of research is critical for understanding the national security environment and provides the underpinnings necessary for critical policy analysis.

The CTC seeks to apply theoretical study and policy analysis in a manner that is useful to our nation's leaders. Its staff understands the paramount importance of policy-relevant research and education in light of the new security environment. In this way, the CTC facilitates educational opportunities and provides policy analysis to enable greater understanding of the threats our nation faces in these troubled times.

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